



**PASTOR GWEN'S MESSAGE
4TH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
"LET'S GET HIT IN THE HEAD"
SUNDAY JANUARY 30, 2022**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

This week I read a story by Barbara Brown Taylor, who is an extraordinary writer and spiritual woman. If you go to her website, it starts off with, "Hello, I'm Barbara Brown Taylor. I say things you're not supposed to say." Well, she tells of attending a seminar where everyone that was invited was to share a story about someone that had been Christ to them. This invitation elicited sincere and typical responses. Stories were told about a friend who had stayed close by during a long terminal illness while other deserted. Another was a story of a mentor who had helped navigate the journey into faithfulness and wholeness. Other similar stories followed until a woman said, "Well, the first thing I thought of, when I tried to think of who had been Christ to me, was who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it."

And isn't that just what is happening in our story in Luke this morning. Jesus speaks a truth so outrageous, so unsettling that his hometown friends and neighbors what to hurl him off a cliff.

However, our story does not start off that way. Jesus, the home-grown lad starts with good news. He is seated in the synagogue in a place of honor. He reads from the scroll of Isaiah and announces, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That is where last week's lesson left off and today's lesson started. What Jesus is saying here is that He is the one that the Father

sent, the one that Isaiah said was coming into the world. Jesus was anointed, just as Isaiah said, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recover the sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. All these things were coming true through Jesus. And that, folks, is the good news.

Now for the bad news. Those present wanted to see miracles, wanted healing and other miraculous deeds. But this was no circus sideshow. Jesus was not an on-demand miracle worker or some sort of snake oil salesman. People wanted hometown healing like what they had witnessed in Capernaum. So why not here?

Instead of a sideshow, after reading the Scroll, Jesus tells two quick and well know stories to make his point. Basically, Jesus continues to preach these two stories, stories right out of their own book. The first story is of the prophet Elijah, the greatest of all prophets. Elijah served during a time when there was a famine in all of Israel. Not a drop of rain fell for three years and six months. Yet, God sent Elijah to a Gentile widow, in Zarephath, during this famine. Why? We will never know but we do know that she was willing to share her last morsel of bread with him. This widow was poor and helpless, yet she had unselfish devotion. Out of her faith she spent her last drop of oil and her last handful of meal to feed the prophet, Elijah. And so, it was by her faith and obedience to God that all of Israel was redeemed.

Wonderful as this story was, it was not a story of wealth and privilege that those in the synagogue liked to hear. She was a Gentile, an outsider, a helpless woman, yet God used her as a model of faith. Why could Jesus not use a prominent man of Nazareth to show a sign of true faith? Was Jesus trying to mess with their minds as he preached this story. And oh boy, Jesus does not stop there. He reminds them of yet another incident in Jewish history concerning a Syrian named Naaman. This story was reported in 2 Kings chapter 5 and coming chronologically after Elijah's successor was in place, Elisha.

Well, Naaman was a leper who was cleansed by the power of God when all the other Hebrew lepers were left unclean. Naaman too was not rich and powerful. He was not an insider but rather a Syrian, not one of God's people. So, you can imagine with this story too, the elders of the synagogue were not caring to listen to such stories. They wanted to hear about how God favored the Jews, not some Syrian. They wanted to hear from Jesus that it was only

the Jews that were God's chosen people. They wanted to hear from Jesus that it was only the Jews that were able to claim God's salvation.

But Jesus wanted the whole story to be told, the total good news of the Gospel. I doubt that he was intentionally trying to offend those in the synagogue, but He was trying to proclaim the prophecy of Isaiah, that he has just read. A new creation had begun with him. It brought good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind and liberation for all who are oppressed. This Good News was no longer just for the Jews, but for all people. It was a gift for all not just for the Israelites. It was not to be hoarded for themselves, but rather to be shared graciously with all people. Well, as you can imagine, this did not go over well with those who were present.

And sometimes even today we forget how big God's love and grace are, that there is enough for all people. Luther would of course say that God's mercies extend to saint and sinner alike and that it is our job to go tell everyone we meet. That being aside, the elders were now really upset with Jesus. And I do wonder how we would have reacted if we were present that day, in that time, in that situation. We might not have reacted much differently. There is a chance that after last week's sermon you could have gone home thinking that you were special having all kinds of wonderful God given gifts in tow and realizing that you are a part of something bigger than yourself, the church. Yes, you are special, don't get me wrong, but when we define our lives as a child of God, we also must realize that we are no better than the sinner sitting next of us. We appreciate the Good News of the Gospel when we identify more with the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed, more like the unworthy souls we are. We pray that we can find ourselves standing in the company of Jesus. We need to be more like the Zarephath widow or Naaman the Syrian general where we can recognize God's fingerprints unmistakably in our lives.

The great author Flannery O'Connor wrote a short story entitled "Revelation". It is the story of one Ruby Turpin. The story begins with Ruby sitting in a doctor's office quietly judging herself to be superior to everyone else there, especially a poor, unkept, little teenaged wretch named Mary Grace seated on the other side of the room reading a book. At first Ruby keeps her judgements to herself, but then she decided to share them out loud. She tells Mary Grace that she is nothing but "white trash" and the lowest of the low. And in the blink of an eye, Mary Grace slams her book shut and hurls it across the room hitting Ruby upside-the-head, square between the eyes. "This", writes O

'Connor "Was the beginning of Ruby's road to redemption. Revelation, it appears, often begins when a large book hits you in the head."

And isn't that exactly what Jesus did with his hometown friends? He threw out quotes from their own Sacred Book. He used Isaiah to open their eyes and when jabbed them with the 1st Kings story of the widow and the 2nd Kings story of Naaman.

Today, we continue to live in a world full of paradoxes that we do not always like. And we all too often need the Good Book to hit us right up-side the head where we can realize that God's blessings are meant not just for us but for all people. God loved humanity so much that he sent Jesus to save all people.

In a few short weeks we will be starting the season of Lent. We will be joining with the Congregational church in using the amazingly beautiful liturgy called "The Holden Evening Prayer" to be led by Mark Donner. Here are the words that we will sing together:

*You have cast the mighty down from their thrones
And uplifted the humble of heart
You have filled the hungry with wondrous things
And left, the wealthy no part.
Great and mighty are you, O Holy One
Strong is your kindness every more
How you favor the weak and lowly one
Humbling the proud of heart.*

Let this be our prayer as we come to know that God's love and grace is for all people. **AMEN**